

Banding Together For These Birds of a Feather

By BEN CRONIN

From Nancy and Bill Bennett's backyard, a resplendent view offers itself: the mouth of Island Creek threads through the saltmarsh towards the sea, and beyond it there is the wooded, rocky outcrop of Bay Farm and right in the middle of it all, an osprey nest.

The osprey, a large predatory bird that survives entirely on fish, was nearly wiped out by the deleterious effects of DDT, according to Conservation Agent Joe Grady. The 1960's saw Duxbury's last pair of ospreys succumb to what seemed like an inevitable ecological trend - inevitable, that is, until 1990, when the osprey reappeared in Duxbury.

Ever since then, Grady, in cooperation with the Mass. Audubon Society, has been erecting poles around town for the large, eagle-like birds to nest on. There are several on the South Shore, two of which are in Duxbury - the town line pole on an island in the Back River, and the Bay Road pole, the one that provides the Bennetts with an intimate view of avian life.



The young osprey, curled over Norm Smith's arm. The metallic band is visible on the bird's leg, just next to Smith's thumb.

That view is about to grow more intimate still - the ospreys hatched two chicks in late May, and now, one month later, it's time for Norm Smith of the Mass. Audubon Society to band them. Nancy Bennett, on whose property the pole sits, has invited a group of onlookers to get a glimpse of the young birds. There are children and grandchildren, wives and husbands, family friends, and, last but not most important - Smith, Grady, and the Audubon workers.

Smith and his assistants lead the group out over the marsh towards the pole, and the scene is like something from Hemingway - a straggling expedition, traipsing over a green landscape.

At the pole the Audubon men, who have been carrying a ladder, hoist it up against the nest so that Smith can scurry skyward and band the young ospreys. Their parents take to the air at the group's approach, wheeling over their nest in erratic circles, screaming.

Smith climbs the ladder quickly and takes a moment at the top. Picking up one of the juvenile birds, which is about the size of a cat, he descends to the crowd.

Up close you can see that it really is just a baby - a large and well-clawed baby, but nevertheless a baby. It can't even stand up on it's own; when



Norm Smith at the nest, with a parent osprey circling above.

Smith lets it down on the marsh. the bird simply collapses in a quick-breathing mass of feathers and wings. That, Smith says, is the position in which the birds sleep. It looks almost like a

lumpy carpet.

Still, it's curious, alert, beautiful. The grandchildren - themselves mostly babies, or at least very young children - crowd around it, occasionally touching its feathers. They've been warned about getting too close to the beak; you can tell simply from looking that the bird can probably break a grown-man's finger.

Smith has attached a metal band just above the talons. When the osprey migrates (they fly to South America for the winter) or otherwise leaves the nest, special insignia on the band will let other naturalists know where the bird is from, originally. This helps the Audubon Society and other interested parties answer questions about how long the bird lives, and where it spends it's life. Though there are satellite-connected bands that allow scientists to track an osprey or other bird at all times, this Duxbury chick has the old-fashioned kind: it will take another human, not an electronic signal, to figure out the vital information about this animal.

Ultimately, it turns out that the Bay Road ospreys are the only successfully breeding pair in Duxbury. The town line pole is empty; the birds, Grady says, are probably the victims of predation - or, in other words, they have likely been eaten.

The expedition has returned to the Bennett's backyard now, and the young birds' parents are returning to the nest. The shrieking in the sky has ceased, the ladder is put away, and Grady, Smith, and his crew are off to another pole. And here, in the estuary of Island Creek, the impenetrable business of nature - the raising of babies, the pursuit of prey, the mystery of the sweltering marsh - goes on.



From left: Matthew Grady, Sydney Grady, Smantha Bennell, Amelia Elfers, and Kate Elfers gather on the marsh.